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ABSTRACT

Revision is the heart of the composing process--the means by which ideas emerge and evolve and meanings are clarified. Yet students often see revision not as an opportunity to develop and improve a piece of writing but as an indication that they have failed to do it right the first time. Revision, whether done with computers or with pen and paper, will go beyond correction only if teachers emphasize the whole text over its parts. When this happens, students discover the power of writing as a means of shaping ideas and clarifying meanings rather than as a way of correcting errors or fulfilling a class requirement. Publishing student writings can be a powerful means of motivating revision, as can providing students with in-class time for revision and allowing flexible due dates for writing. (Seventeen references are attached.) (RS)

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Revision

Revision is the heart of the composing process—the means by which ideas emerge and evolve and meanings are clarified. Donald Murray argues that writing *is* rewriting [ED 159 673]. Yet students often see revision not as an opportunity to develop and improve a piece of writing but as an indication that they have failed to do it right the first time. To them, revision means correction. This attitude is attributable partly to textbooks, in which revision is often defined as the act of "cleaning up" or "polishing" prose, and partly to instructional practices that treat revision as cosmetic changes rather than as rethinking one's work [Sommers, 1982]. The purpose of this digest is to provide information that can help in changing students from "correctors" to "revisers."

What Is Revision?

Revision is often defined as the last stage in the writing process (prewriting, writing, and revision). Nold [ED 172 212], however, argues against this linear interpretation of writing in which "planning, transcribing and reviewing are . . . one-time processes." Rather, revision is a "retranscribing of text already produced after a portion of the already existing text is reviewed and found wanting." Sommers [1982] sees revision as "a process of making changes throughout the writing of a draft, changes that work to make the draft congruent with a writer's changing intentions."

How Much Do Students Revise?

For the novice writer, however, revision appears to be synonymous with editing or proofreading. A National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) study found that students' efforts at revision in grades 4, 8, and 11 were devoted to changing spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Students seldom made more global changes, such as starting over, rewriting most of a paper, adding or deleting parts of the paper, and adding or deleting ideas [Applebee, Langer, and Mullis, ED 273 994].

Bridwell [EJ 236 505] found that 56 percent of the changes made by high school seniors were at the surface level (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization) or lexical level (adding, deleting, or substituting single words). The remaining revisions were either at the phrase level or at the sentence or multi-sentence level. There were no revisions at the text level (changes in the function, audience, or overall content of the writing).

The college freshmen studied by Perl [EJ 217 511] produced more than thirty revisions per paper, but few beyond the word and sentence levels. Pianko [EJ 204 419] reported similar results, with the college freshmen she studied making "no major reformulations."

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How Can Teachers Help Students to Revise?

Merely requiring students to revise will not produce improved writing [National Assessment of Educational Progress, ED 141 826]. Direct teacher intervention, however, seems to produce positive results. Hillocks [EJ 268 134], for example, examining teacher comment, prewriting instruction, and revision, discovered that instruction focused on specific goals and skills "coupled with the presence . . . of revision" improved the quality of the writing produced by seventh and eighth graders. Robinson [ED 276 053] found that children in grades two through six produced better stories when they revised in response to teacher questions directed at specific content.

Similarly, Sommers [1982] found that teacher comments on college students' writing text-specific and, therefore, not helpful. Further, the comments often took students' attention away from their own purposes and focused it on those of the teacher. Sommers suggests that teachers provide more specific comments and design writing activities that allow students to establish purpose in their writing.

Calkins [1986] recommends that students discuss positive rather than negative aspects of their writings. "Why not," she asks, "ask them to find bits of their writing—words, lines, passages—which seem essential, and then ask them to explore why these sections are so very significant?"

Publishing student writings can be a powerful means of motivating revision. Publication instills pride and provides an incentive to produce good work. Giving students the opportunity to share their writing through hardback books, newspapers, or newsletters, or through oral presentations to other students, shows them that quality matters," and that quality is achieved through revision" [Balajthy, ED 274 997]. Additionally, Balajthy recommends providing students with in-class time for revision and allowing flexibility in due dates as a way to encourage students to engage in more extensive revision.

Can Computers Improve Revision Skills

The ease with which students can manipulate text with word processing programs has prompted increased computer use in the writing classroom as a means of promoting student revision. However, the research on whether computers lead students to revise more frequently or more effectively is at yet inconclusive. In her study of the effects of word processing on the revision strategies of advanced college freshman writers, Hawisher [ED 268 546] found that students using computers did not revise more than those using pen and paper, nor were there differences in the quality ratings of the two writing groups. Working with interested tenth and eleventh graders, Kurth

[ED 277 049] discovered that while word processing motivated students to write and promoted group discussions, it did not affect either the length of compositions or the amount and quality of revisions made. Daiute [EJ 332 972] found seventh and ninth grade students who used computers made revisions involving longer segments of their draft texts, but the same students revised less frequently when using computers than when using pen and paper.

More positive findings are reported by Flinn [ED 274 963], who found that sixth graders using computers to revise compositions wrote longer papers and received slightly higher holistic scores than those using pen and paper. However, the most striking differences between the groups had less to do with computers than with an instructional emphasis on fluency, word choice, and mechanics. Womble [EJ 291 267] observed that students using word processing tended to work longer on their writing, to make more changes in the text, and to develop a better sense of audience than they did when writing with pen and paper.

It appears, then, that revision, whether done with computers or with pen and paper, will go beyond correction only if teachers emphasize the whole text over its parts. When this happens, students discover the power of writing as a means of shaping ideas and clarifying meanings rather than as a way of correcting errors or fulfilling a class requirement.

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